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ABSTRACT

The research process in studying narrative analysis, or story-telling, is examined, focusing on: (1) how researchers use narrative to position themselves with respect to participants in a study, (2) how researchers use conversational stories to construct and negotiate meaning, and (3) what the absence of certain stories reveals about the researchers' expectations and the frames operating within the community under study. The inquiry emerged from research on story-telling in an elementary school, in which the researchers observed that they were also telling stories rich in narrative form. One of the researchers subsequently interviewed another and analyzed the interaction, looking for linguistic evidence of assumptions and expectations, and also for the role of conversational stories in the re-telling of an experience. Some elements felt to be important in this analysis are highlighted, including use of stories to negotiate meaning, sort data, and evaluate an experience. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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Who is Telling Stories and Whose Stories Are Being Told?

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This paper addresses some recent work on narrative analysis, particularly as it relates to the research process. How do researchers use narrative to position themselves with respect to the participants in a study? How do researchers use conversational stories to construct and negotiate meaning? What does the absence of certain stories reveal about the researchers' structures of expectation and the frames operating within the community under study? This preliminary look at the role of narrative in research illustrates the complex, self-reflective process of conducting cross-cultural studies and speaks to the challenges of intercultural communication.

A long tradition of scholarship surrounds the nature of stories and the act of story-telling, as academics from disparate disciplines seek to understand the role of narrative in society (see Toolan 1988 for a linguistic introduction to the study of narrative).[1] Conspicuously absent from this work, however, is a serious discussion of the ongoing stories researchers tell each other as they describe, interpret, and analyze the data they are collecting. This paper addresses some recent work on narrative analysis, particularly as it relates to the research process. How do researchers use narrative to position themselves with respect to the participants in the study? How do researchers use conversational stories to construct and negotiate meaning? What does the absence of certain stories reveal about the researchers' structures of expectation and the frames operating within the community under study? This preliminary look at the role of narrative in research illustrates the complex, self-reflective process of conducting cross-cultural studies and speaks to the challenges of intercultural communication.

In keeping with the process oriented approach, I shall begin with a brief discussion of the evolution of this project in terms of how it has affected

[1] A complete discussion of this scholarship is beyond the scope of this paper.

the collection of data.[2] I came to this study with a professed interest in narrative analysis and a desire to explore the social construction of identity among Latino adolescents. A professor at the Graduate School of Education (GSE) suggested that I choose the Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle Magnet School as the site for my research, as the school offered an opportunity to interact with Puerto Rican students who had lived on both the island and the mainland.[3] Located in a low-income urban neighborhood characterized by drugs, crime, and tense Latino/African American relations, Julia de Burgos seemed a rich environment for study. What kinds of stories would these students tell? How would they tell their stories?

In September 1996, two students from GSE and I set out with tape recorders in hand to collect the life histories of the students at the Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle School. We decided that lunch period would provide an ideal time to speak with students informally about their experiences in both Puerto Rico and Philadelphia. We were primarily interested in collecting oral narratives, but soon realized the difficulty of interviewing students without first establishing a relationship of trust. Moreover, the noise of a middle school lunchroom made tape recording virtually impossible. We then turned our attention to a writing workshop which another GSE student had initiated in one ESL classroom. As "Growing Up Latino in Philadelphia" was the workshop's theme, we saw this as a chance to provide structure and legitimacy while exploring these issues with the students in both conversation and composition. We felt that the workshop's theme would support our collective interest in issues of language, ethnicity, and identity (Rebecca Freeman, Proposal for 1997 Ethnography in Education Forum).

Immediately upon joining the writing workshop, we recognized the difficulties of implementing this type of activity in this particular setting. The students' writing skills in their first language, Spanish, were weaker than we had anticipated and we questioned the rational of teaching writing via their second language, English (see Cummins 1984 for discussion). Although we had originally conceived of the writing workshop as an elementary ESL class, we encouraged students to write in whichever language they felt more comfortable. Our attention shifted from second language instruction to developing activities that would stimulate student writing. Frustrated with the difficulties the students seemed to be having with our writing topics, the teacher suggested that we choose "lighter" themes. Towards the end of the semester we began to restructure the work-

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[2] Although I am reluctant to speak for my colleagues, I have tried nonetheless to represent our collective reading of the situation as fairly and accurately as possible. Readers please note that this reconstruction of events reflects above all my own understanding of the situation as it unfolded.

[3] At the time of this study, Julia de Burgos had recently received a five year grant to fund its transition to a model of two-way bilingual education.

shop, emphasizing shorter pieces of writing and including art as part of the lessons. On the surface, this proved more "successful" as the students seemed to enjoy writing on topics such as upcoming holidays. In retrospect, however, I question why we thought our initial efforts were so poorly received by the students.

As we encouraged students to tell their stories, we ourselves became profoundly aware of how we too were telling stories. The conversations we taped in the car on the way back to campus and the interviews we conducted with one another were rich in narrative form. These stories reflected the "structures of expectation" we constructed and the "positions" we continuously negotiated and adopted as researchers conducting a cross-cultural study. They constituted a wealth of data as we considered the role of narrative in the research process. As white, middle-class graduate students, the research project we began at this predominantly low-income, Puerto Rican middle school informed our understanding of culture, communication, and intercultural communication. How did "we" use stories to make sense of "them" and in particular "their stories"? Before turning my attention to a discussion of the data, I would like to summarize some of the literature which has informed my analyses.

Current voices in the field: A review of the literature

In the first of two articles on the nature of naturally occurring narrative, Labov and Waletzky (1967) illustrated how verbal skills were used to evaluate experience (Labov 1972: 355). Here, they laid the framework for a systematic form - function analysis of everyday narrative. Labov (1972) focused on the linguistic devices used to evaluate experience within black English vernacular culture. He claimed that the evaluative aspect of narrative merited considerable attention as it constituted "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its raison d'être: why it was told, and what the narrator was getting at" (Labov 1972: 366). Labov distinguished four types of evaluation (external, embedded, evaluative action, suspension of evaluative action) which might reveal why a narrator felt a story to be worth telling. Labov argued that a narrative must be reportable; otherwise, it would remain untold.

As Tannen (1993: 22) noted, Labov's evaluative elements were closely related to her own notion of evidence of expectations, as both authors sought surface linguistic evidence for underlying structures of culturally shaped expectation and assumption. Tannen (1993) examined narratives produced in response to a short film. Assuming that narratives varied cross-culturally, she identified 16 types of evidence which represented "the imposition of the speakers' expectations on the content of the film" (Tannen 1993: 21). In particular, she highlighted how expectations affect language production, concentrating on the task of isolating specific form - function relationships within a given text.

Davies and Harré (1990) developed the notion of positioning, specifically as it related to the discursive production of "self" through narrative. Positioning, they explained, "is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines (Davies and Harré 1990: 48). Davies and Harré argued that through "positioning" we situate ourselves in conversation with respect to familiar narrative forms learned via our own subjective histories. They believed that positions could be isolated by examining the autobiographical elements of conversation, as these often revealed how the participants viewed themselves and one another in terms of the story line being constructed. Narrative, then, was the vehicle through which we made sense of the world.

Polanyi (1982) looked at the discursive functions of narrative within a given conversation. She argued that rather than viewing stories within discourse as discrete units, conversational stories functioned syntagmatically. The "meaning" of a story in conversation was the product of a two-fold process. First, meaning derived from the narrator's evaluation of the story's point and relevance to the conversation at hand. Second, meaning stemmed from the "talk" which followed the telling of a story in conversation. Here, the narrator and the audience would jointly negotiate their interpretation of the story-telling event. As Polanyi commented, meaning could thus be assigned to a story long after the event took place. She emphasized the micro-level functioning of narrative, as conversational stories revealed local webs of meaning.

Benmayor, Juarbe, Vazquez Erazo, and Alvarez (1988) and Bigler (1996) examined how stories functioned on a societal level. Benmayor et al. posited that stories were "threads to the past, to one's personal history, and to a collective identity" (p. 3). Furthermore, they asserted that a group's narratives reflected "their position and their perspective within the social whole ... given structural inequality, stories "mean" differently, both in their content and in their function" (Benmayor et al. 1988: 3, see Fairclough 1988 for discussion). In "Stories to Live By", Benmayor et al. examined the life histories of several Puerto Rican women with respect to the sociopolitical climate in which these story telling events were realized.

In keeping with this work, Bigler (1996) compared and contrasted the stories told by European-American seniors and minority speakers about "being" and "becoming" American. She openly challenged the assumption that "all ethnic stories are the same" and called for more historical analyses and ethnographic studies of the variation among immigrant experiences (see Bigler 1996: 200 for a list of recent scholarly works which address this issue). Both the work of Bigler and Benmayor et al. pointed to the need for macro-level analyses of stories and story-telling events. How did these "big picture" issues influence intercultural communication and cross-cultural research?

Stories from the field: A preliminary look at the data

Days after the first visit to Julia de Burgos, I interviewed one of my research partners, analyzing the underlying frames which shaped this interaction. Following Tannen (1993), I looked for surface linguistic evidence of our assumptions and expectations. Absent from my analysis, however, was a consideration of the function of narrative in this interaction. What did the stories we told reveal about our structures of expectation? How could we look at these stories in terms of positioning? How did these stories function on the micro-conversational level?

During the conversation, my colleague and I speak at great length about the role of language at Julia de Burgos.[4] In the following excerpt, I am concerned with how the students may perceive me as a white woman who speaks Spanish.[5] I am recounting my feelings upon interviewing three Latino girls.

1. **AP**: because I felt like I didn't learn
2. not that I didn't learn that much but that they did <u>not</u> want to talk to me that much
3. almost like
4. I was a little bit too in on their world or something
5. or
6. they weren't sure
7. or I kept on thinking that they were looking at me going
8. who is this woman?
9. **SR**: I bet it was disconcerting for them to have someone who spoke their language but
10. wasn't quite the same
11. **AP**: I think that I was just really troublesome to them
12. like I just
13. **SR**: Yeah
14. **AP**: and I've had that happen to me before in Panama
15. where people would say when I saw you I thought that you couldn't speak Spanish
16. who are you and where are you from
17. you know and I felt that again
18. that same like
19. you tricked us almost
20. not that it's a bad thing
21. but they just don't know
22. where I am
23. **SR**: I think this is interesting how
24. I think we are sort of in a round about way talking about how language is
25. connected to culture

(interview 9/30/96)

Lines 1 - 8 provide a context for the story about Panama which is told in lines 14 - 22. These introductory remarks reveal my attempt to construct a frame from which to understand my position relative to these three students at Julia de Burgos. Lines 1 and 2 contain a judgment "because I felt like I didn't learn", a retraction of that judgment "not that I didn't learn that much", and an alternate reading of the situation "but that they did not want to talk to me". The judgment, made more salient by the use of a negative, suggests that I expected to learn something and that this learning did not take place — either the information was absent or I failed recognize it. The repetition of negative constructions implies that I did not expect to sense such "resistance" on the part of the students. The retraction and alternate reading show how I attempt to make meaning out of an incongruous situation by advancing several interpretations. In order to reconcile this perceived discontinuity between my frame and my experience, I offer three feasible explanations and evoke an anecdote. The explanations (lines 2, 4, 6 - 8), laid out as distinct possibilities with the connective "or", show my efforts to position the students as "other". I emphasize the pronoun "they" in each explanation, highlighting a strong in-group/out-group distinction. This frame, although fairly visible upon close scrutiny of the linguistic evidence, finds further validation in the Panama anecdote.

The anecdote in lines 14 - 22 reveals the story line within which I have situated myself and the students. The use of the non-syntactic anaphor "that" (line 14) implies that I am referring to a previously encountered type of event (mentioned earlier in the discourse), one which informs my reading of the present. In lines 15 - 16, I clarify my use of "that" by saying "where people would say when I saw you I thought that you couldn't speak Spanish / who are you and where are you from." I am describing, in general terms, situations in which I have been positioned as one who cannot speak Spanish. Although on the surface this statement implies that I am being positioned as a non-Spanish speaker, perhaps it is I who does the positioning. This generalization may suggest my insecurities as a Spanish speaker, for I consider English to be my dominant tongue. This statement provides further evidence for the in-group/out-group distinctions which were developed in the previous paragraph. Although I speak Spanish, I position myself as "other." Furthermore, the pronouns in lines 17 - 22 add to this construction of two different groups — researchers and subjects. In line 17, I ally myself with SR offering her co-membership with the inclusive phrase "you know." In line 21, I clearly position the students as "they." Thus, in certain respects, this story serves to highlight the construction of

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[4] In this excerpt "AP" refers to me, while "SR" refers to the colleague whom I interviewed. Apart from my own name, all others have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals in this study.

[5] SR is a native speaker of English learning Spanish, while I am fluent in both languages.

in-group/out-group identities, as I verbally negotiate my role as researcher in relation to the participants in the study and my university colleagues.

The comment "you tricked us" (line 19) presents an interesting linguistic twist, as I invert the pronouns and take on the voice of the students. Here, I have attributed certain characteristics to the students according to my own structures of expectation. The students have not balked at being deceived, rather I have read their reticence to share stories with me as an indication of mistrust. Moreover, I qualify this remark with the adverb "almost" suggesting that perhaps "trick" is too strong a word. In lines 20 - 22, I rescind the allegation of trickery and offer an alternate explanation. The judgment "not that it's a bad thing" seems to follow from my concern that the students will not understand "where I am" or more specifically my position (line 22). After all, I look like "someone who couldn't speak Spanish." Although I have no intention of "tricking" the students; nonetheless, given my past experiences I am worried about how they will perceive me.

Looking at the role of conversational stories within discourse, the location of the Panama anecdote exemplifies Polanyi's assertion that we often use narrative for illustrative purposes (Polanyi 1982: 54). The Panama story serves to exemplify my assertion "I think that I was just really troublesome to them" (line 11) by explaining why I took this position. As Deborah Tannen observed,

> people approach the world not as naive, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli as they exist in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated veterans of perception who have stored their prior experiences as "an organized mass," and who see events and objects in the world in relation to each other and in relation to their prior experience (Tannen 1993: 20-1).

The Panama story is in accord with this view of human behavior. Here, a story with its strictly ordered structure can be seen as an "organized mass" of prior experience. It functions as empirical evidence to support my interpretation of a novel situation. Furthermore, Polanyi argued that a story's interpretation within a particular conversation also rested upon the meaning assigned to it via the talk following the telling (Polanyi 1982: 60). SR's evaluation of my narrative in lines 23 - 25 suggests that she is offering an interpretation as to why I told my story. The hedges "sort of" and "in a round about way" imply that SR is reluctant to speak for me and my intentions in relating the Panama anecdote; however, she offers a story in keeping with what she feels was the "meaning" of mine. By examining narrative in terms of its micro-level discursive function, we see how story mean-

ing is negotiated through story telling within a specific conversation.

Learning to read stories: A close look at the process of data analysis

Turning to the issue of data analysis with respect to macro-level research concerns, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) argued that the conception of stories and story telling events was shaped by local webs of meaning that extended beyond micro-conversational levels. In her study of two culturally different communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, she wrote, "For Roadville, Trackton's stories would be lies; for Trackton, Roadville's stories would not even count as stories" (Heath 1983: 189). This observation seems particularly salient when we consider the writing workshop at Julia de Burgos in terms of intercultural communication.

As researchers working in a cross-cultural setting, we must remain cognizant of the strength of our own narrative voices. If we extend the definition of "narrative" to include what Davies and Harré termed "story lines" (1990: 46), we see how narrative analysis can be used across levels and across contexts to identify patterns of meaning. The story lines in which we choose to situate ourselves and the participants in the study often influence what we "find". A close look at how we have attempted to "read" the writing workshop reveals this continuous process of negotiating meaning through previously learned story lines.

Throughout the semester, we expressed growing concern as to how we could motivate students to tell their stories during the writing workshop. As one GSE researcher commented,

> I think that we're going to have to be very clever about doing things like brainstorming and I think so far we have been very clever about getting them not tricking them but getting them to want to do it but I think that our job is to motivate them (GSE researcher YL 10/16/96).

We spent much time negotiating what "motivation" means in this context and our use of pronouns around this issue seems to reflect the positions of power we have adopted within our "story". Moreover, we devoted many hours to contemplating our roles with respect to the students and the teacher in the classroom. Many of our conversations revolved around teaching strategies as we recounted what "works" and what does not. These comments again reveal our efforts to make meaning in terms of our underlying structures of expectation and assumption. Researcher SR and I remarked at the end of one lesson,

> SR: ...it was great that you had the model today, but I'm not sure that you needed it. You could have read your story and then said O.K. tell me about

AP: Yeah I was just thinking that too. We don't need an overhead of it. We can just read it (excerpt from conversation among AP, SR, and YL 10/16/96).

These reflections seem to highlight the dynamic nature of the research process as we continually recast our frames to fit new experiences and add new lines to our stories. Furthermore, the themes on which we choose to focus — motivation, roles, teaching strategies — speak to our underlying conception of what is worthy of mention.

In summarizing the writing workshop thus far, our collective dissatisfaction with the theme "Growing up Latino/a in Philadelphia" merits some discussion from an intercultural communication perspective. We now turn to the third question brought forth in the introduction to this paper: What does the absence of certain stories reveal about the researchers' structures of expectation and the frames operating within the community under study? Labov's comments on the "evaluative" aspect of narrative may inform our understanding of the situation. He wrote:

> To identify the evaluative portion of a narrative, it is necessary to know why this narrative — or any narrative — is felt to be tellable; in other words, why the events of the narrative are reportable... In other words, if the event becomes common enough, it is no longer a violation of an expected rule of behavior, and it is not reportable (1972: 370 - 371).

Perhaps many of the students were unresponsive to our topics not because of poor writing skills; but rather, because the stories we asked them to tell were unreportable in this context. For example,

> We then moved to writing compositions. The boys had difficulty getting started. At first I thought Jorge was illiterate, but I think that he for some reason or another just did not want to participate. Carlos and Miguel kept challenging my authority and spent a lot of time finding paper, etc. Seemed that many of them did not have a lot of experience with reading and writing. I was surprised at how low level their Spanish skills were — lots of common words spelled wrong ("ay" for "hay"; dropped "s"; "tan bien" for "también") (field notes 10/9/96).

Here, I attribute the students' difficulties to lack of "experience with reading and writing". My focus is on academic issues of language proficiency, perhaps indicative of the frame I evoke at this point in time to explain what I observe. Bearing in mind Labov's reportability constraint, perhaps we have asked the students to tell a story that they do not feel is

worthy of being told. Consider the following observation:

> The boy with the mustache (next to Raúl) also had difficulty writing on his own. After saying that he didn't do anything for Halloween, I tried to get him to talk about another holiday (like Valentine's Day — he told me that he had a girlfriend). He kept saying that he did nothing, so I started dictating a story to him — "I don't celebrate any holidays. I always stay home...". This silliness seemed to keep his attention and he seemed surprised at being able to write such stuff (field notes 10/30/96).

Here, I am asking "the boy with the mustache" to tell an "unreportable" story, for he claims to have done nothing for Halloween. In dictating a story about "doing nothing", I am openly flouting the "reportability" constraint. This may explain why the boy shows such surprise at my behavior. I am challenging both his assumptions about the function of writing and his expectations as to how a teacher should behave. Returning to the question of why many students did not seem willing to address the topic "Growing Up Latino in Philadelphia", perhaps as a "common" experience, it did not seem worthy of narrative in this context. Consider the following:

> Marta Mendosa explains that she the Dean of Students — the one who expels people. Tells us that the students at Julia de Burgos are very difficult. The children never leave their block (draws a square on the table with her fingers — perhaps to emphasize this point). They don't know anything else but the few blocks in which they live. They are born, grow up, have babies, etc. on the same corner. She used to take the kids on a clandestine field trip to the Gallery on Market Street — most of them have never been to Center City, let alone a shopping mall (field notes 10/23/96).

If what Marta Mendosa said is true, then maybe we were wrong in assuming that our topic would generate narratives worthy of report. In fact, the introduction of this theme can be seen as an act of positioning — for we construct the students as "other" and silence their voices by asking for an untellable story.

In sum, whether or not we take the above interpretation to be "correct"; nonetheless, the process by which we arrive at such conclusions emphasizes the importance of frame analysis to cross-cultural research. Unless we are aware of both our own "structures of expectation" and the "frames" operating in the community under study, our data may be subject to gross misinterpretation. We need to recognize that not just our stories, but also our analytical skills are shaped by cultural forces. As intercultural researchers, we must continually ask why and how we have arrived at certain interpretations. In this paper I argue that narrative analysis helps us to understand the stories we create to make sense of the world, particularly as we seek to understand the perspectives of others.

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